

ANCIENT ♦ WORLD ♦ LEADERS

Genghis Khan



Brenda Lange

Introductory essay by
**Arthur M.
Schlesinger, Jr.**

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◆ ANCIENT WORLD LEADERS ◆

ALEXANDER THE GREAT

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GENGHIS KHAN

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◆ ANCIENT WORLD LEADERS ◆

GENGHIS KHAN

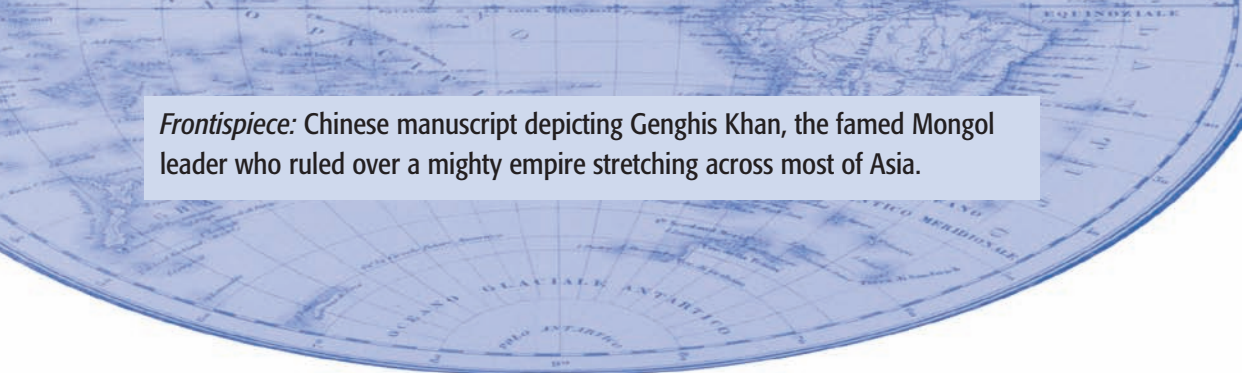


Brenda Lange



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Frontispiece: Chinese manuscript depicting Genghis Khan, the famed Mongol leader who ruled over a mighty empire stretching across most of Asia.

Genghis Khan

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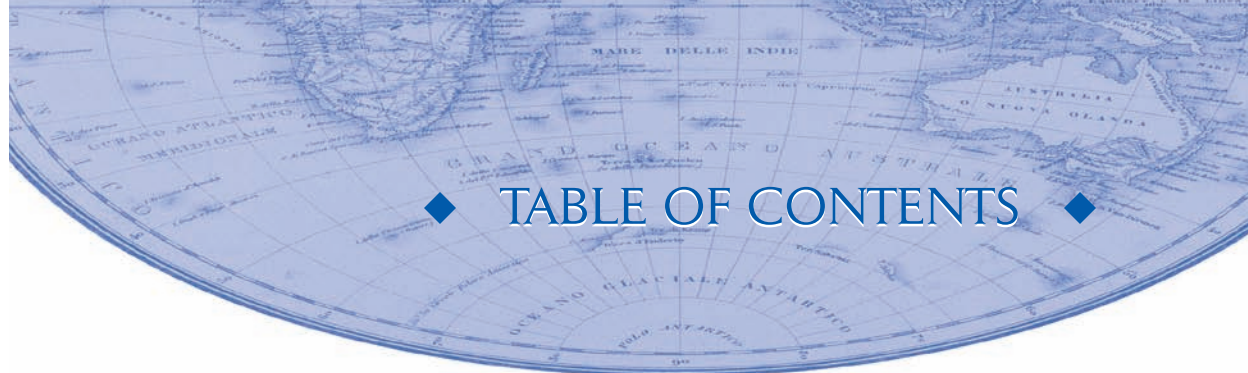
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ON LEADERSHIP

Arthur M. Schlesinger, jr.

Leadership, it may be said, is really what makes the world go round. Love no doubt smoothes the passage; but love is a private transaction between consenting adults. Leadership is a public transaction with history. The idea of leadership affirms the capacity of individuals to move, inspire, and mobilize masses of people so that they act together in pursuit of an end. Sometimes leadership serves good purposes, sometimes bad; but whether the end is benign or evil, great leaders are those men and women who leave their personal stamp on history.

Now, the very concept of leadership implies the proposition that individuals can make a difference. This proposition has never been universally accepted. From classical times to the present day, eminent thinkers have regarded individuals as no more than the agents and pawns of larger forces, whether the gods and goddesses of the ancient world or, in the modern era, race, class, nation, the dialectic, the will of the people, the spirit of the times, history itself. Against such forces, the individual dwindles into insignificance.

So contends the thesis of historical determinism. Tolstoy's great novel *War and Peace* offers a famous statement of the case. Why, Tolstoy asked, did millions of men in the Napoleonic Wars, denying their human feelings and their common sense, move back and forth across Europe slaughtering their fellows? "The war," Tolstoy answered, "was bound to happen simply because it was bound to happen." All prior history determined it. As for leaders, they, Tolstoy said, "are but the labels that serve to give a name to an end and, like labels, they have the least possible connection with the event." The greater the leader, "the more conspicuous the inevitability and the predestination of every act he commits." The leader, said Tolstoy, is "the slave of history."

Determinism takes many forms. Marxism is the determinism of class. Nazism the determinism of race. But the idea of men and women as the slaves of history runs athwart the deepest human instincts. Rigid determinism abolishes the idea of human freedom—the assumption of free choice that underlies every move we make, every word we speak, every thought we think. It abolishes the idea of human responsibility,

since it is manifestly unfair to reward or punish people for actions that are by definition beyond their control. No one can live consistently by any deterministic creed. The Marxist states prove this themselves by their extreme susceptibility to the cult of leadership.

More than that, history refutes the idea that individuals make no difference. In December 1931 a British politician crossing Fifth Avenue in New York City between 76th and 77th Streets around 10:30 P.M. looked in the wrong direction and was knocked down by an automobile—a moment, he later recalled, of a man aghast, a world aglare: “I do not understand why I was not broken like an eggshell or squashed like a gooseberry.” Fourteen months later an American politician, sitting in an open car in Miami, Florida, was fired on by an assassin; the man beside him was hit. Those who believe that individuals make no difference to history might well ponder whether the next two decades would have been the same had Mario Constatino’s car killed Winston Churchill in 1931 and Giuseppe Zangara’s bullet killed Franklin Roosevelt in 1933. Suppose, in addition, that Lenin had died of typhus in Siberia in 1895 and that Hitler had been killed on the western front in 1916. What would the 20th century have looked like now?

For better or for worse, individuals do make a difference. “The notion that a people can run itself and its affairs anonymously,” wrote the philosopher William James, “is now well known to be the silliest of absurdities. Mankind does nothing save through initiatives on the part of inventors, great or small, and imitation by the rest of us—these are the sole factors in human progress. Individuals of genius show the way, and set the patterns, which common people then adopt and follow.”

Leadership, James suggests, means leadership in thought as well as in action. In the long run, leaders in thought may well make the greater difference to the world. “The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong,” wrote John Maynard Keynes, “are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. . . . The power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas.”

But, as Woodrow Wilson once said, “Those only are leaders of men, in the general eye, who lead in action. . . . It is at their hands that new thought gets its translation into the crude language of deeds.” Leaders in thought often invent in solitude and obscurity, leaving to later generations the tasks of imitation. Leaders in action—the leaders portrayed in this series—have to be effective in their own time.

And they cannot be effective by themselves. They must act in response to the rhythms of their age. Their genius must be adapted, in a phrase from William James, “to the receptivities of the moment.” Leaders are useless without followers. “There goes the mob,” said the French politician, hearing a clamor in the streets. “I am their leader. I must follow them.” Great leaders turn the inchoate emotions of the mob to purposes of their own. They seize on the opportunities of their time, the hopes, fears, frustrations, crises, potentialities. They succeed when events have prepared the way for them, when the community is awaiting to be aroused, when they can provide the clarifying and organizing ideas. Leadership completes the circuit between the individual and the mass and thereby alters history.

It may alter history for better or for worse. Leaders have been responsible for the most extravagant follies and most monstrous crimes that have beset suffering humanity. They have also been vital in such gains as humanity has made in individual freedom, religious and racial tolerance, social justice, and respect for human rights.

There is no sure way to tell in advance who is going to lead for good and who for evil. But a glance at the gallery of men and women in *ANCIENT WORLD LEADERS* suggests some useful tests.

One test is this: Do leaders lead by force or by persuasion? By command or by consent? Through most of history leadership was exercised by the divine right of authority. The duty of followers was to defer and to obey. “Theirs not to reason why/Theirs but to do and die.” On occasion, as with the so-called enlightened despots of the 18th century in Europe, absolutist leadership was animated by humane purposes. More often, absolutism nourished the passion for domination, land, gold, and conquest and resulted in tyranny.

The great revolution of modern times has been the revolution of equality. “Perhaps no form of government,” wrote the British historian James Bryce in his study of the United States, *The American Commonwealth*, “needs great leaders so much as democracy.” The idea that all people



should be equal in their legal condition has undermined the old structure of authority, hierarchy, and deference. The revolution of equality has had two contrary effects on the nature of leadership. For equality, as Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out in his great study *Democracy in America*, might mean equality in servitude as well as equality in freedom.

“I know of only two methods of establishing equality in the political world,” Tocqueville wrote. “Rights must be given to every citizen, or none at all to anyone . . . save one, who is the master of all.” There was no middle ground “between the sovereignty of all and the absolute power of one man.” In his astonishing prediction of 20th-century totalitarian dictatorship, Tocqueville explained how the revolution of equality could lead to the *Führerprinzip* and more terrible absolutism than the world had ever known.

But when rights are given to every citizen and the sovereignty of all is established, the problem of leadership takes a new form, becomes more exacting than ever before. It is easy to issue commands and enforce them by the rope and the stake, the concentration camp and the *gulag*. It is much harder to use argument and achievement to overcome opposition and win consent. The Founding Fathers of the United States understood the difficulty. They believed that history had given them the opportunity to decide, as Alexander Hamilton wrote in the first Federalist Paper, whether men are indeed capable of basing government on “reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend . . . on accident and force.”

Government by reflection and choice called for a new style of leadership and a new quality of followership. It required leaders to be responsive to popular concerns, and it required followers to be active and informed participants in the process. Democracy does not eliminate emotion from politics; sometimes it fosters demagoguery; but it is confident that, as the greatest of democratic leaders put it, you cannot fool all of the people all of the time. It measures leadership by results and retires those who overreach or falter or fail.

It is true that in the long run despots are measured by results too. But they can postpone the day of judgment, sometimes indefinitely, and in the meantime they can do infinite harm. It is also true that democracy is no guarantee of virtue and intelligence in government, for the voice of the people is not necessarily the voice of God. But democracy, by assuring the right of opposition, offers built-in resistance to the evils

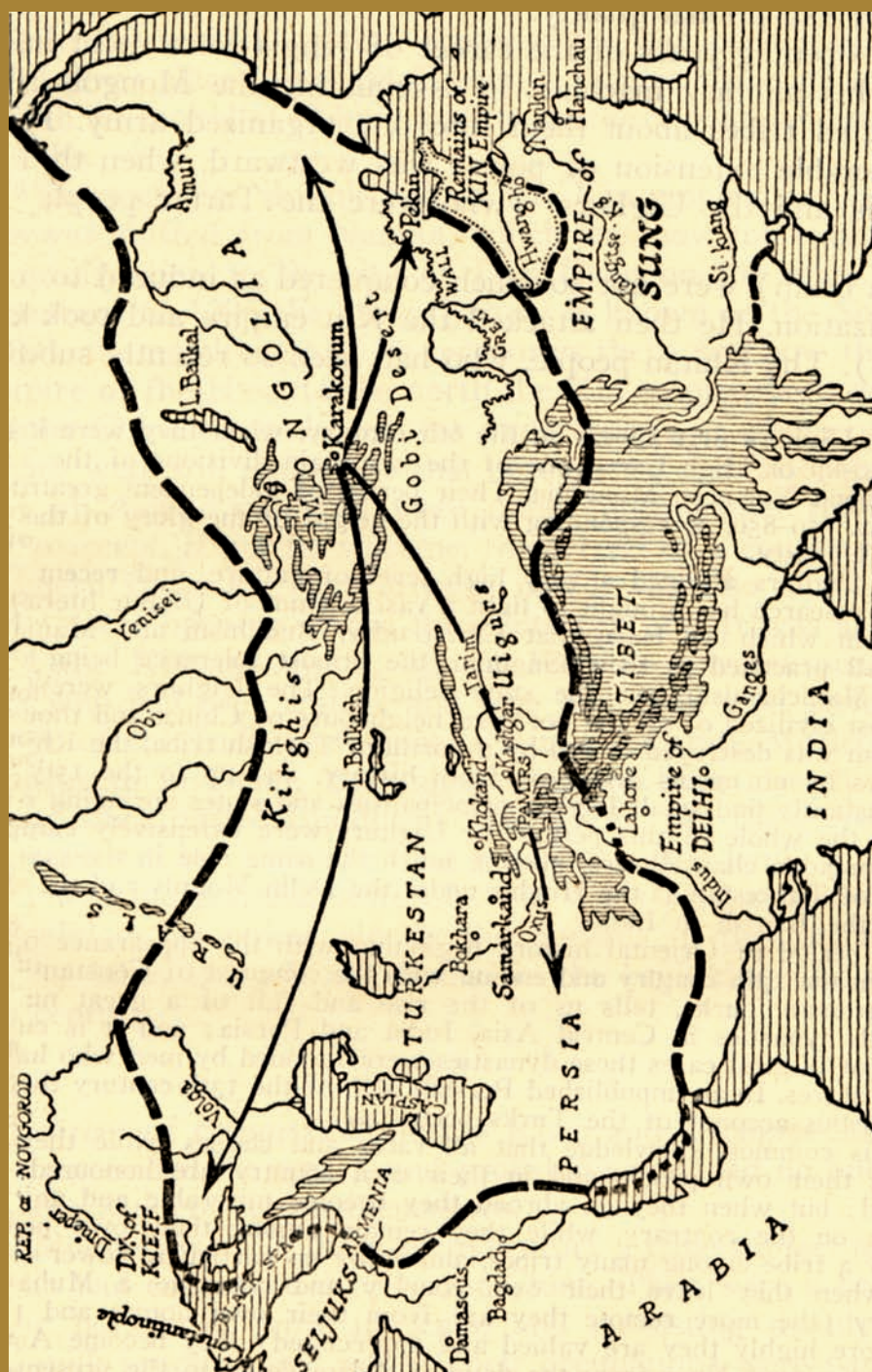
inherent in absolutism. As the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr summed it up, “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man’s inclination to justice makes democracy necessary.”

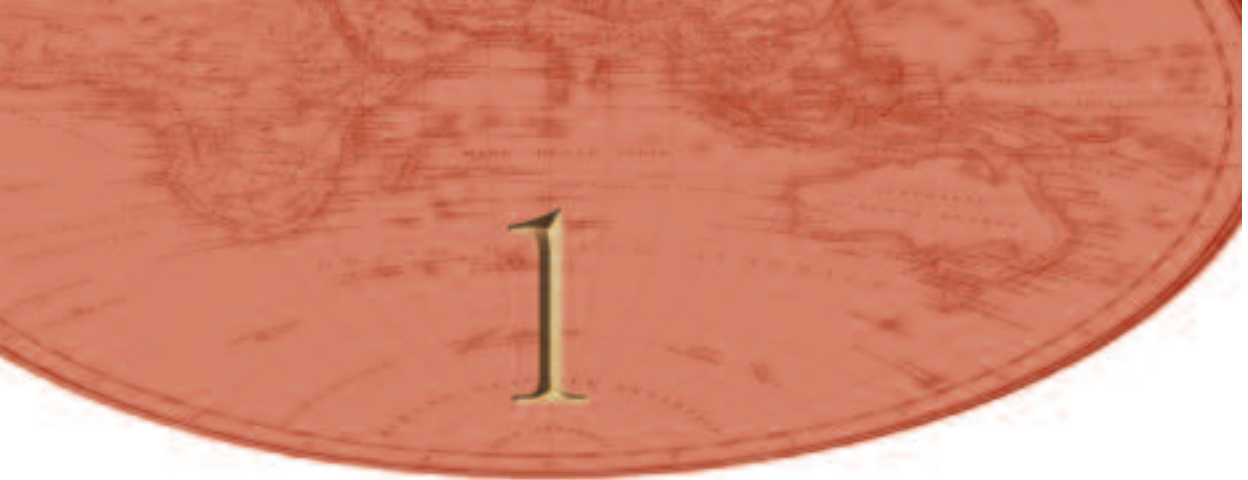
A second test for leadership is the end for which power is sought. When leaders have as their goal the supremacy of a master race or the promotion of totalitarian revolution or the acquisition and exploitation of colonies or the protection of greed and privilege or the preservation of personal power, it is likely that their leadership will do little to advance the cause of humanity. When their goal is the abolition of slavery, the liberation of women, the enlargement of opportunity for the poor and powerless, the extension of equal rights to racial minorities, the defense of the freedoms of expression and opposition, it is likely that their leadership will increase the sum of human liberty and welfare.

Leaders have done great harm to the world. They have also conferred great benefits. You will find both sorts in this series. Even “good” leaders must be regarded with a certain wariness. Leaders are not demigods; they put on their trousers one leg after another just like ordinary mortals. No leader is infallible, and every leader needs to be reminded of this at regular intervals. Irreverence irritates leaders but is their salvation. Unquestioning submission corrupts leaders and demeans followers. Making a cult of a leader is always a mistake. Fortunately hero worship generates its own antidote. “Every hero,” said Emerson, “becomes a bore at last.”

The single benefit the great leaders confer is to embolden the rest of us to live according to our own best selves, to be active, insistent, and resolute in affirming our own sense of things. For great leaders attest to the reality of human freedom against the supposed inevitabilities of history. And they attest to the wisdom and power that may lie within the most unlikely of us, which is why Abraham Lincoln remains the supreme example of great leadership. A great leader, said Emerson, exhibits new possibilities to all humanity. “We feed on genius . . . Great men exist that there may be greater men.”

Great leaders, in short, justify themselves by emancipating and empowering their followers. So humanity struggles to master its destiny, remembering with Alexis de Tocqueville: “It is true that around every man a fatal circle is traced beyond which he cannot pass; but within the wide verge of that circle he is powerful and free; as it is with man, so with communities.” ■





1

THE MANY SIDES OF GENGHIS KHAN

*Under the reign of Genghis Khan, all the country between
Iran and the land of the Turks enjoyed such peace.*

—ABU’L GHAZI

*In the Muslim countries devastated by Genghis Khan,
not one in a thousand inhabitants survived.*

—ALA AL-DIN ATA MALIK JUVAYNI

These two quotes sum up the reputation of the Ruler of the World, the Great Khan of the Mongol Empire, the statesman, barbarian, and, according to the *Washington Post*, “Man of the Millennium”—Genghis Khan.

From what is commonly known about Genghis Khan, it is almost unbelievable that a prestigious publication such as the *Post* would name him to such an exalted position. Yet it did, and trying



A depiction of Genghis Khan in battle. His warlike reputation is all too evident in his facial expression, the raised sword as a sign of aggression, and the arrow bouncing off of his armor suggesting that Genghis Khan and his Mongol Army were an unstoppable force. Indeed, his empire was one of the largest of the ancient world, and his name became synonymous with destruction.

to figure out the reasoning behind its proclamation gives one pause for thought.

In making their choice, the editors at the *Post* first thought about what the last millennium had been all about.

According to an article by Joel Achenbach, “It was a thousand years of plagues and wars and genocides, of empires rising and falling, of technology, of intellectual enlightenment, of capitalism, and industrialism, and democracy. When it was good, it was very good. When it was bad, it was ferociously evil.”

The last two sentences reflect the core of Genghis Khan. While the thought seems paradoxical, it is wise to remember that almost everyone is made up of positive and negative qualities, and Genghis Khan was no different—he was a man of his time, shaped by his culture, his history, and his environment. A brilliant military strategist, practical administrator, and strict disciplinarian, he lived in a harsh, sometimes cruel, natural world that left little room for weaklings, slackers, or the ignorant.

The *Post* considered politicians and monarchs such as Thomas Jefferson and Queen Victoria, scientists such as Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin, as well as religious leaders and other figures—but then realized that a large part of the millennium had been forged through violence and upheaval. “The big story . . . is that a single species fully exerted its will upon the Earth. Man seized his world, conquered it, bent it, and reshaped it,” wrote Achenbach.

Prior to the start of the last millennium, civilization existed in isolated pockets. Life was brutal and short. Food was scarce, and mankind was confused. Today we live in a global society, the context in which the *Post* chose its man as “someone who made the world smaller, who moved people and technology across the surface of the Earth, who advanced mans’ dominion over a big planet. A doer.”

Christopher Columbus, Marco Polo, and the Vikings all contributed great advances to man’s knowledge of the world. But another man was required to bring the east and west together—to educate, lead, conquer, and unite. The Mongol Empire lasted only a brief time, yet its founder has lived on in



its culture and legend. By the end of the 13th century, his descendents had expanded his empire from the Pacific Ocean to Eastern Europe and from Siberia to the Persian Gulf. This vast domain dwarfed the Roman Empire and that of Alexander the Great in comparison. Communication was swift through an innovative system of horse relay stations, and trade was free and open across the vast expanse.

In modern Mongolia, Genghis Khan's image appears on stamps, money, calendars, and posters—even though his name was taboo during the Soviet occupation of the 20th century because of the losses the Russians had sustained at his hands. Sculptures and societies honor his memory. He is widely revered throughout Mongolia as a national icon.

The ways in which the Mongol Empire affected Europe are not immediately obvious, but they are significant. At first glance, the fact that the Mongol forces carried the Plague into Europe, killing a third of its population, would be seen as a negative, but on further inspection, it is found to be the opposite. The fact that there were fewer people to carry the workload increased the value of any one person's labor, ending feudalism, and presaging the rise of capitalism.

For all of these reasons, it is important to study the life and times of Genghis Khan and to understand his place in history. Born into the family of a minor chieftain, he survived a difficult, hardscrabble childhood, learning early how to fend for and protect himself and his family. Starting out with a few loyal followers, he adroitly manipulated other tribal chiefs, won several crucial battles, and made important alliances. Within a relatively brief lifespan of about 60 years, he was recognized as a godlike ruler who had been sent on a divine mission, in charge of hundreds of thousands of troops and with the fate of two-thirds of the known world under his command. And while some scholars compare Genghis Khan to Attila the Hun, who also originated in the Asian steppes and created a vast empire by conquering

millions, it is important to note that Attila's empire collapsed when he died, while Genghis Khan's continued for generations with repercussions still evident today.

The world remembers Genghis Khan and his army as bloodthirsty warriors who murdered innocent children and destroyed cities, burning crops and leaving whole cultures as burned-out husks in their wake. While it is true that the Mongol warriors in the early 13th century were fierce fighters, it is also true that the majority of the history of this era was written by the vanquished foes of the Mongol warriors, who undoubtedly view the conquests through somewhat biased eyes. The victims of the Mongol Horde—notably the Russians, Chinese, and Muslims—portrayed the Mongols as immoral and savage. But as David Nicolle writes in *The Mongol Warlords*, they “ . . . really were ordinary human beings reacting to the world around them in a manner determined by their cultural heritage.”

The Secret History of the Mongols was written by an unknown author or authors shortly after Genghis Khan's death. It claims to record the history of the Mongol people and the story of the great Khan. By its very nature, the nomadic lifestyle of the Mongols left few clues for archeologists and historians. This book is their only written history. In it, Genghis Khan is described as a “hero” while his less desirable side is shown honestly. While he remained devoted to his first wife well into old age, he had also killed his half-brother while still in his teens.

More contradictions abound in the historical record. According to Nicolle, Muslim historian Rashid al-Din quotes Genghis Khan as saying that his greatest pleasure in life was “to cut my enemies to pieces, drive them before me, seize their possessions, witness the tears of those who are dear to them and to embrace their wives and daughters.” However, on the other hand, a Chinese philosopher visiting the Mongol court recorded the ruler's view of himself this way:



Genghis Khan and his army were often described as fearsome beings whose features—and record of brutality—were exaggerated and distorted beyond the truth. But given the ferocity of their conquests, it is not surprising that the parties who recounted tales of the Mongol invaders—usually the victims of the Mongols—would have such biased viewpoints.

Heaven is weary of the luxury of China. I shall remain in the wilderness of the north. I shall return to simplicity and moderation once again. As for the clothes I wear and the food I eat, I shall have the same as cowherds and grooms and I shall treat my soldiers as brothers. In a hundred battles I have been at the forefront and within seven years I have performed a great work, for in the six directions of space all things are subject to one ruler.

He and his men were not sadistic per se. The atrocities they perpetrated so efficiently were seen as a normal byproduct of war—they believed one's enemies deserved to die. However, as Nicolle writes, "There was an apparent contradiction—at least to the modern mind—between the high moral standard of Genghis Khan's life and the wise, even reflective, attitude he took to government, and on the other hand, the total lack of concern he and his men showed for human life . . . He was a ruthless empire builder, but he was a man of his time, his culture and his circumstances. He was also, without doubt, a military genius who used available resources to cataclysmic effect."

His contemporaries often seemed to accept his acts as a matter of course. Marco Polo wrote that his death was "a great pity, for he was a just man and a wise one." The peace that followed his reign was bought at a high price—and, as Nicolle says, "Whether peace was worth such a price begs moral questions. One thing is clear. As in so many other cases, the conqueror bears the burden of guilt for the death and destruction he wrought. His successors enjoy the praise for building new and sometimes enlightened civilizations in the 'new world' that he left to them."

So perhaps it is true that Genghis Khan deserved to be appointed Man of the Millennium. As Achenbach wrote on



December 31, 1995, “As an apostle of the extremes of the last thousand years, there exists no better candidate than Genghis Khan, who embodied the half-civilized, half-savage duality of the human race.”



2

THE LAND OF THE MONGOLS

The land that nurtured Genghis Khan and saw the rise of his great Mongol Empire is as mysterious and characterized by extremes as the ruler himself. Mongolia is the fifth largest country in Asia—four times the size of Japan and just slightly smaller than the state of Alaska. If a map of Mongolia were laid over a map of the United States, its borders would spread from Washington, D.C. to Denver, Colorado. Situated between China and Russia, and sometimes mistakenly believed to be a part of one or the other country, Mongolia covers a total of approximately 972,000 square miles. It is completely landlocked, and one of Asia's largest freshwater lakes, Hovsgol Nuur, is found there. Mongolian terrain runs the gamut from semi-desert to grassy steppes and mountains as high as 14,350 feet.

The Altai mountain range and the Tien Shan Mountains border the country to the west and south, respectively. In the north, the mountains bordering Siberia are covered with permanent glaciers



A Mongolian steppe, or plain. The land of Mongolia is one of unspoiled natural beauty, with deserts and mountains all sharing space with lakes and steppes. It has apparently been inhabited for 500,000 years in this condition.

and alpine forests. The Gobi Desert covers about one-third of the south-central area of the country. Although the word “Gobi” translates literally to “desert” in many languages, the Gobi is made up of an array of desert areas and forests, high mountains, sand dunes, and valleys. The Gobi is home to numerous animal species including mountain sheep, snow leopards, lynxes, gazelles, camels, wolves, and foxes.

Temperatures and weather conditions vary widely. From November through March, average temperatures drop below freezing. But in the summer, green grasses and multi-colored wildflowers cover the plains, while temperatures hover around a moderate 60 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit.

Mongolia is considered to be one of the cradles of civilization. Archaeologists have discovered stone implements and artifacts there that are about 500,000 years old. Monuments from the Bronze Age (as far back as 3,000 B.C.) have been found, including stone mounds and grave sites complete with intricately carved “reindeer stones.” Such stones stand between three and 14 feet high and are carved in three separate sections. The uppermost section contains images of the sun and moon, carved deer across the middle portion, and images of carvings of knives, swords, bows, axes, and more on the bottom. Hundreds of such stone monuments with their gracefully carved deer have been found around Central Asia. Other types of stone statues with carvings of people from the sixth century depict hats, belts, weapons, and jewelry, giving historians an accurate record of life at that time.

Scholars agree that the first Hun state—the earliest settled civilization in the area known as Mongolia today—was established around 200 B.C. They were a powerful nomadic tribe that controlled a vast territory and maintained wide diplomatic, cultural, and trade relations with their neighbors, becoming well known for their trade in slaves, art, and jewelry. The Huns split into northern and southern factions in the middle of the first century A.D., with the southern Huns establishing the states of Han and Xia, which existed until the 10th century. By the fourth century, the northern tribe had fiercely attacked the Roman Empire and Germanic tribes, winning some battles and losing others. After their initial attacks, these Huns settled along the Danube River and acted more often as allies of the Romans. Around 400 A.D., Attila the Hun became the new king. More aggressive than his predecessors,



he menaced much of Europe during the fifth century.

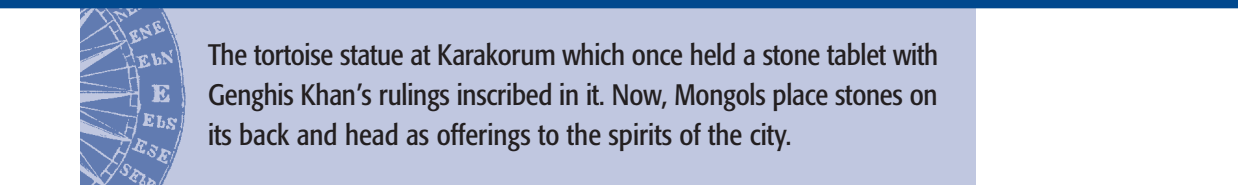
Between the third and sixth centuries, the Hun territory was occupied by other powerful states as well. During the seventh to 10th centuries, the Turkic, Uighur, and Kirghiz tribes inhabited this area, but little is known about these people. What is known is that these early Mongols were nomads who relied on their livestock in many ways for their daily subsistence and existed closely with all natural things. They retain much of their original beliefs and lifestyle today.

During the 11th and 12th centuries, several Mongol tribes formed. The Merkit, Kerait, Naiman, Uirat, and Jalair tribes lived on the slopes of the Altai Mountains, north to Lake Baikal and southeast into Manchuria. They had their own rulers and constantly fought among themselves.

Europeans knew nothing about Mongolia before the first attack led by Subodei, handpicked by Genghis Khan to head the first foray into the west. For two years, Subodei warred with cities around the Caspian Sea, including defeating an army built by Russian princes. Subodei and his army left in their wake the legend of the Mongolian Horde and myths of cannibalistic invaders galloping upon giant horses.

The earliest records show that Mongols were nomadic herdsmen; indeed, the majority still maintain that lifestyle, with only a small percentage of citizens living permanently in towns and cities. Depending on the season and the weather, the pastoral nomads would move from site to site four to six times a year. Those who lived in the central steppes packed up their belongings and herded their animals down well-traveled paths to areas with more food and milder climates. Those who lived among the forests in the north, along the border with Siberia, survived mainly by hunting and fishing. These divisions were not strict, however, as the hunters also kept horses and sheep and the pastoral nomads also hunted.

Not all Mongols were nomads, and there were tribes that preferred to remain settled. In general, relations between



One of the largest cities was the ancient capital city of Karakorum. Near the city sits a granite turtle with a long slot in its back. At one time it held a stone tablet on which Genghis Khan's rulings were carved. Although the tablet has disappeared, dozens of small stones have been placed on the turtle's



back and head as offerings by passing Mongols to the spirits of the city. Karakorum was the capital of Genghis Khan's empire, and its remains have provided a wealth of information to archaeologists and historians. It was built in 1220 on his orders on the site of an even earlier city. Work continued on this city even after Genghis Khan's death, with the outer wall and palace completed in 1235. Karakorum was an important crossroads for the eastern and western worlds, providing cultural information in both directions. It also was the administrative and industrial hub of the Mongolian Empire. Its iron and steel foundry were well established, and metalworkers and artisans of all types plied their wares there. Twelve areas for worship, of all different faiths, existed within the walls, a testament to the religious tolerance practiced during this time.

When Genghis Khan stayed in the city, which he did only intermittently, he did so in style. According to the Franciscan missionary who visited the city in the mid-1200s, the palace was actually a magnificent pavilion, protected by a special triple wall. The hall was estimated to be about 165 by 135 feet, with flooring of green glazed tiles with pillars of granite and a throne or balcony for the ruler, covered with animal skins. These treasures, along with a solid silver tree with branches filled with carved fruit, were discovered during Russian excavations in 1965.

Many Mongols of the 13th and 14th centuries believed that there was one universal god, Tengri, who was the god of the sky, and the one who gave Genghis Khan power to rule. The people would typically climb to mountaintops to pray to be closer to him. In a sign of submission, they would take off their hats and hang their belts over their shoulders. In addition to Tengri, they believed in the sanctity of Mother Earth and the spirits that existed in all things.

Mongols believed that the goal of life was to live in balance. If they lived a respectful life, the world would remain in balance with the blue heaven above and Mother Earth nurturing them

from below. Such a balance maximized personal power. They were convinced that heaven and earth, spirits of nature, and their ancestors supplied all their needs and protected them. *Shamans*, or spiritual leaders, would be called in to restore balance when it was thrown off. The universe was a circle, and everything in life moves in a circular motion, the path of the sun and the cycles of the seasons. As part of this belief that life has a circular pattern, Mongols asserted that everyone is at the center of his or her own private universe and is responsible for his or her own actions.

Some of their other religious customs seem unique, and one wonders how they came into existence. For example, it was prohibited to touch fire, which also was considered sacred, with a knife. To sacrifice a drink, a full cup of liquid would be thrown in the air while saying certain phrases. An oath of friendship or the sealing of a treaty was carried out while drinking blood from a cow's horn into which had been placed a piece of gold. Because they believed in the spirituality of water, they were prohibited from dirtying rivers and streams. Apparently, it was against their religion to wash clothes, dishes, or even themselves. This lack of hygiene caused problems between the Mongols and their Islamic vassals, who were accustomed to washing regularly as part of their religious practices.

Mongolia's climate is cold and dry, with long, cold winters and short, hot summers with little rainfall throughout most of the land. The weather is variable and unpredictable with average temperatures dropping below freezing November through March, and more temperate the rest of the year. The landscape is forbidding and bleak much of the year, but in the short summer months it becomes a green countryside covered with grasses and flowers such as peonies, roses, and delphiniums, blue columbines, and red and yellow lilies.

Living off the land and in an area of such extreme beauty—the vast desert, mountain ranges, and large lakes, and the unspoiled vistas of the steppes that stretched seemingly



A modern shaman in Tibet. Shamans were very important in Mongol life, and were more than religious leaders. They would be asked to consult on many aspects of daily life, as well as issues on warfare and politics.

forever—instilled in the Mongols a respect for all living creatures. It was believed that man and nature depended on each other for survival and that waste was a sin. This reverence for the land and animals was in keeping with the Mongolian belief that all humans should strive to live in balance with the natural world around them. Mongols believed that even rocks, forests, mountains, rivers, and lakes have their spirits that

demand respect. *Shamanism* was the belief that spirits lived within all natural elements: the sky, wind, forest, and earth. Believers would face south and make offerings when worshipping the rising sun. Beliefs were expressed through rituals, telling of the future, exorcisms, and dreams. Shamans had many duties. They would perform funerals and oversee sacrifices. They were called as healers and to offer blessings and perform hunting and weather magic. They would predict eclipses, during which the people would hide in their tents and make lots of noise to scare off the evil spirits. Shamans wore white and rode white horses. They carried a drum and a staff and were believed to live half in the human world and half in the spirit world.

It was believed that shamans could travel to the world of the spirits and would change themselves into birds to journey into the heavens. Similarly, they could travel into the underworld by following secret passages known only to the spirits and shamans. They were known to “live backwards” or perform functions in reverse order, sometimes wearing clothing inside out, or receiving something handed to them from behind their backs. They were revered as prophets because of their unique relationship with the spirit world and respected as political advisers. Not just anyone could become a shaman—rather, shamans were selected by a special spirit and initiated into the ways of the spirit world by it. Some believe that Genghis Khan was a shaman because of his propensity to climb to the top of the nearest mountain to pray whenever he received bad news or tragedy struck.

The Mongols consulted shamans on many details of everyday life, including where to pitch camp or when to go to war. They made sacrifices and offerings to their ancestors and read the future from the burned and dried bones of sheep. The people felt that worship was a personal act, and therefore there were no churches or organized religious gatherings. This lack of organized worship gave visitors to Mongolia the impression



that there was no religion in that country. Although some used priests as go-betweens in the natural and human worlds, Genghis Khan believed the soul was linked to heaven and the individual was at the center of his own universe.

Life on the Mongolian steppes was harsh and unforgiving. A herdsman's day revolved around his cows, sheep, and horses. The animals were used for food, felt, leather, and wool, and the horses provided transportation. Two-humped, or Bactrian, camels were kept by Mongols in the Gobi Desert area. These hardy animals and their herders transported materials over mountains and deserts. Camels were able to carry two times the weight of horses and were able to move just as quickly.

Beef was eaten only on special occasions, and horses were consumed only in emergencies, leaving mutton to provide the family's standard diet. Meat usually was boiled or roasted over the fire, and everyone ate from one pot. Despite the fact that Mongols consumed very little fruit or vegetables, they were healthy and strong. Tea was the favorite drink and was enjoyed with every meal and in between. A flour tea with butter, milk, and salt created a thick dish that is something like a soup. Mare's milk and cheeses were dietary staples. Great quantities of mare's milk was consumed every day. A favorite alcoholic drink of Genghis Khan and his sons, *airag*, is made from fermented mare's milk. To milk the mares, the men would tether the horse to a pole, allowing the foal to begin to suckle before then extracting the milk for the family. The milk then was poured into a large skin and churned with a large club. After it turned sour, they kept churning to extract the butter. The milk was boiled and stirred, the skin on top removed after it cooled. Sometimes the milk was fermented to make yogurt, cottage cheese, or sweet dry curd. Any food made from milk is popular in Mongolia and is known as "white food." During the summer, traditional meals of mutton and tea were supplemented with sun-dried milk curd, sugar, biscuits, and bowls of milk.

The common home was a felt tent called a *ger*, sometimes known as a *yurt* in the west. This round, self-contained home was the perfect habitation for these nomads. It required a short period of time for a family to assemble the wooden lattice framework, often made from willow saplings, and cover it tightly with a double layer of felt, which effectively keeps out the elements. The center top had a small hole to allow the smoke from the family fire to escape. Even if the fire was extinguished and a piece of felt pulled over the chimney opening, the *ger* remained warm and snug. Homes were always set up in a southeast direction to greet the rising sun for religious reasons, but also because the cold winds blew in from the north. *Gers* are sometimes erected on wooden carts, usually for the upper classes, which can then be moved from site to site like a primitive mobile home.

Within the *ger*, tradition dictated that certain customs be followed. The kitchen was set up on the east side, with the fire and chimney in the center. The owners' beds were placed on the northeast side, and sacred possessions displayed on the north side. Household possessions were stored on the west side. Male guests would be seated on one side, and all male possessions stored on that same side. Women and their belongings used the opposite side. Today, it is common to see smaller *gers* erected near homes for storage.

During the time of the Mongolian Empire, the *del*, a robe resembling a Japanese kimono, was commonly worn. This garment was ankle length and had no collar but wrapped across in front. The *del* was tied with a leather belt decorated with metals, sometimes pure gold. Married women of the time wore tall, thin hats made from bark covered with silk and decorated with precious stones, feathers, and animal fur. There were a variety of styles and fashions depending on whether they were meant for everyday use or special occasions and, of course, on the weather. Tradition, custom, and a person's tribe dictated the style of clothing worn.



The inside of a typical Mongolian *ger* in modern times. The layout has stayed remarkably similar since the days of Genghis Khan, with the chimney and cooking fire in the center, and beds on the northeast side.

Mongols have a rich artistic history. Painting developed from early rock paintings of the Uigher tribe of the eighth century. Embroidery was widely practiced; almost every possible surface may end up being embroidered upon. These nomads not only decorated their *gers*, but they made pictures on silk, embroidered bags to carry bowls and other implements; hats, boots, and book coverings were also decorated with thread. Thousands of years of the lonely life of herdsmen were put into song and story, detailing the life of herding horses and sheep



Mongolian children taking part in horse racing. Horses are still a large part of Mongolian life, and children as young as age two start competing in tests of equestrian skill.

and traveling from place to place. Classic folk songs and epic tales also help to relate the history of these people.

Horses were the Mongol's most valuable possession. Mongolian horses—sometimes called *Prjevalski* after the Russian explorer who wrote about these wild horses in the 1870s—are small, tough, and very self-sufficient. They are able to survive the long, harsh winters when other breeds would starve to death. These hardy beasts break through the ice and find tendrils of greens underneath and huddle together to keep



out the cold. They were and still are a center of life. The Mongols traded them for supplies, drank their milk, used them for transportation—and, of course, for the cavalry.

Almost as soon as a Mongolian boy could walk, he was taught to ride a horse and shoot a bow and arrow. Many families relied on their proficiency with these tools. Tribesmen hunted using bow and arrow, lassos, and traps. The nobility used trained hawks, which also were common gifts brought by visiting dignitaries. Antelope, boar, and wild donkey were all commonly hunted. The *kuriltai* was a chance for the tribal leaders to meet and discuss a wide variety of matters pertaining to their tribes. During the council, soldiers would have time to compete in wrestling, archery, and horse racing: the three main games of men. Mongolian wrestling originated well before the time of Genghis Khan and is unique to that country. There are no weight categories or age limits in this national sport. The wrestlers wear heavy boots, a loincloth, and a small cap. The goal is to knock or throw down the other wrestler and force him to touch the ground with either an elbow or knee. Winners are awarded honorary titles and given gifts.

Horse racing is also hundreds of years old. During the Mongolian Empire, soldiers used these races to demonstrate their riding skill and the speed of their specially chosen mounts. Today both boys and girls compete, beginning as young as age two. There is a Mongolian saying: “The nomad is born in the saddle.” These races are often done bareback. Winners are given great honor and praise, but what is interesting is that even though the losers are embarrassed, the crowd does not shame them; rather, they shout words of encouragement to build up the rider’s confidence for the next attempt.

Ratchenevsky quotes an ancient Mongol as saying: “If the horse dies, I die; if it lives, I survive. What can a Mongol do if he loses his horse?”



THE BOY OF IRON

Today we find it odd that the year of someone's birth is a fact that can be contested. However, in Central Asia in the 12th century, recordkeeping was not what it is today, which is why the year of the birth of the baby destined to become one of the greatest leaders the world had ever known is not a matter of fact, but rather of conjecture.

In either 1162 or 1167 (which is the generally accepted date) a son was born to a minor chieftain of the Kiyat-Borjigid tribe, which had broken away from a larger tribe, the Tayichigud, led by the baby's grandfather. The chieftain, Yesugei, had recently conquered a rival Tatar tribe and captured its leader, whose name was Temujin.

In the northern part of the land known today as Mongolia, near the Onon River, Yesugei and his wife, Ho'elun, had their first child and named him Temujin, after their captured foe. Naming a



The Tatar tribes were identified erroneously by Europeans as “Tartars,” associating the Mongols with Tartarus, which was a Greek word for a region of Hell. This illustration is from a book that describes the Tatars and their nomadic lifestyle. The Tatars were rivals of the Mongol tribes, and soon they would come into conflict with the father of Genghis Khan.

child after a recent event or a person important in the lives of the parents was a custom of the time. The baby was born clutching a small blood clot in his tiny fist, which was taken as an omen that he would grow up to be a mighty warrior.

The name “Temujin” also means iron or ironsmith, and some say the baby’s cradle was also made of iron, all symbolizing his iron will.

A small-time chieftain or warrior could build a personal army while collaborating with a more powerful comrade. Chiefs were appointed by tribal elders to lead in wartime or to settle disagreements within the tribe. If the chief proved to be incompetent, he was simply ignored. If a chief were successful, however, clans and tribes would join him, increasing his power and control. The people were quick to obey during wartime, but in times of peace they resisted and resented their leaders’ interference in their everyday lives. At the top of Mongolian societal pyramid was Yesugei’s family, the Golden Clan. Next in line was the aristocracy of noblemen, chiefs, warriors, commoners, and non-Mongols. The people were divided into units such as the *ulu*, or tribe; *oboq*, or clan; and *yasun*, or family.

Mongolian society was patriarchal, in that clans of family units were led by the fathers, and groups of clans formed tribes. Polygamy was normal, and kidnapping of women from rival tribes was common. Ironically, although women were treated in many ways like property, they played an important role in the culture. They were sought after by chiefs for their advice and were often brought along on military campaigns. While the men were at war, the women took over the traditional male roles of milking the mares and making bows and arrows, saddles, and other equipment. Normally, women were responsible for milking the cows and goats, making clothing and tents, and cooking.

Relationships between the tribes were therefore complicated by marriages of captured slaves or wives, alliances forged between tribes, and the forced allegiance of the captured tribes to their conquerors. Temujin’s mother was no exception. The Merkits were rivals of the Tayichigud. Ho’elun was actually kidnapped by Yesugei from her Merkit

husband. One day Yesugei was out hunting with his tame falcon when he spotted Ho'elun and her husband traveling to their home. Yesugei was enchanted by her beauty and decided he must have her. He hurried back to his tent and convinced his two brothers to join him. They did, and the three men chased the pair, intimidating the man, who ran back to the Merkits. Yesugei and his brothers brought Ho'elun back with them to become Yesugei's wife, and shortly thereafter, the mother of Temujin.

Although Temujin was the first-born of Yesugei and Ho'elun, he had two older half-brothers who were Yesugei's sons from an earlier marriage, and three younger brothers and one sister, all born about two years apart. As the oldest of the four, he gradually became responsible for overseeing his younger siblings. He gave out rewards as well as punishments for their behavior, and quickly grew into his role as an authority figure over them.

Like all Mongol children, Temujin learned to ride a horse as soon as he could walk and learned to hunt and fish shortly thereafter. He and his friends played along the river, in the woods, and on the steppes. One of his best friends was Jamuka. He and Jamuka made a pact of friendship making them *anda*—similar to the concept of “blood brothers”—when they were young by giving each other gifts of carved arrowheads and whistling arrows and drinking each other's blood.

One day when Temujin was about 14, he and his younger brothers were out fishing and caught several fish. His two older half-brothers came along and demanded that the younger boys hand them over. When they complied, the older boys ate the fish and taunted the younger children with their conquest. It is said that the older boys had made a habit of teasing and threatening the younger, and the episode with the stolen fish was perhaps the final straw for Temujin. Later that night when his older brothers were away from the tribe,

standing watch, Temujin and his younger brother Qasar crept up on Bekter, the older of the two half-brothers, and killed him with a deluge of arrows.

Ho'elun was angry. According to David Nicolle in *The Mongol Warlords*, Ho'elun scolded the two, saying, "One of you was born clutching a clot of black blood! The other is like the savage Qasar dog after which he is named! Except for your shadows, you have no companions. Except for your horses' tails you have no whips." Despite her anger, she did not punish Temujin and Qasar for committing such a heinous act. The surviving half-brother even pledged his allegiance to Temujin, firmly establishing his leadership role within the family.

The reason Temujin had taken on the role as head of the family at such an early age was that his father had been murdered when the boy was about 10 years old, leaving the family to fend for itself. When Temujin was nine, Yesugei had decided it was time to arrange a marriage for his son. The plan was to approach the Merkit tribe, his mother's clan, with an offer of marriage with one of their eligible young women as a peace offering over the theft of Ho'elun nearly a decade before.

On the way to see the Merkits, Temujin and his father stopped at the camp of another tribe, the Onggirat, which was renowned for the beauty of its women. While there they spoke with a man of that tribe who had recently had a dream which he recounted. In the man's dream, a falcon had brought him the sun and moon in its talons. He felt this was an omen that Temujin would come to him and should marry his daughter. When the man introduced his daughter, the 10-year-old Borte, to Yesugei, the latter agreed that the girl would make a good wife for his son, and the two were engaged. According to *The Secret History of the Mongols*, the history of the reign of Genghis Khan written shortly after his death, Temujin was attracted by the girl's "lively face and

flashing eyes” and eagerly agreed to the arrangement. It was decided that Temujin would live with the Onggirat until the two were old enough to be married.

Yesugei headed back to his tribe while Temjuin stayed behind. It was the custom of the time for travelers to be welcomed by other tribesmen and offered food and drink. Tired and thirsty from his travels, Yesugei unwisely accepted the hospitality of a group of Tatars, who, unbeknownst to Yesugei, knew him as the conqueror of their former leader, Temujin’s namesake. The Tatars put poison in Yesugei’s food, making him so sick that three days later, after managing to make it back to his tent, he passed away. Before he died however, he managed to identify his killers as the Tatars. This murder would cost the Tatar tribe their very existence when Temujin was old enough to avenge his father’s death. (Ironically, years later when Europeans visited the area, they confused the name Tatar with the similar Tartarus, a Greek word for a region of Hell. To the Europeans, the Mongols seemed like devils, and they transferred the name, causing Mongols to be known as Tartars in Europe.)

Temujin rejoined his family after his father’s death, leaving Borte with the Onggirats until he could return years later to reclaim her as his bride. In the meantime, Temujin was too young to take his father’s position as chieftain, and tribal leaders did not want his half-brother as leader either. The women of the Tayichigud tribe shunned Ho’elun because she was not one of them. In an attempt to rid themselves of the problem of a woman alone with seven children, the tribe simply packed up and moved on when it was time for the spring migration, abandoning Ho’elun and isolating the children, the youngest of whom was just an infant. It was a near miracle that the family was able to survive. Temujin’s help as man of the family was invaluable, and he searched for food alongside his mother and helped her with the younger children. They foraged for berries, dug up wild roots and



A depiction of a Tatar from Russia. The Tatars would unwittingly find themselves on Temujin's blacklist after they poisoned his father, Yesugei. The poisoning was in revenge for Yesugei defeating their former leader, Temujin's namesake.

other edible plants, and killed small game to survive. According to *The Secret History of the Mongols*, the little clan lived like wild animals along the banks of the Onon River. They made nets and bent needles into fishhooks and did their best to stay alive while nurturing bitterness against those who had abandoned them.

As a young teenager, Temujin was very strong and fearless. After the murder of his half-brother, stories began to spread about his abilities, and the stories grew into tales of his ruthlessness and strength. Once, after Ho'elun and her children had managed to acquire a few horses, thieves stole all but one of them. Temujin rode off in pursuit and managed to get all the horses back. The leaders of his former tribe, the Tayichigud, began to fear him; perhaps he was preparing to lay claim to his father's position within the clan. So the leaders set out to capture Temujin. They did not have an easy time of it, as Temujin escaped into the nearby forest, where he managed to hide and survive for more than a week. Finally, he emerged due to hunger and was promptly captured.

When the Tayichigud returned to camp with Temujin in tow, the leaders there ordered the boy harnessed into a special wooden contraption called a *cangue*, similar to wooden stocks that clamp around the neck and wrists. This made it difficult for Temujin to sit or sleep. The tribesmen passed him from tent to tent during his incarceration until one night during a celebration when he managed to escape despite the guards who watched him. He hid for a time in the Onon River by staying submerged and breathing through a reed. He was soon spotted by a sympathizer named Sorkan, who alerted him every time his enemies came close. After the searchers gave up trying to find Temujin, he left the water and joined Sorkan in his tent where they removed the harness. Sorkan hid him in a cart full of wool for three more days, then gave him a horse and some food. Temujin made his way



Temujin hiding in wool from the Tayichigud. The Tayichigud were afraid that Temujin's ambition was to assume his father's position as leader of the clan and looked to stop his ascent. Luckily he was able to escape from his captors with the help of a sympathizer named Sorkan.



back to his camp, where he and his family lived in fear of the Tayichigud for some time, hiding out and surviving as they had before, living on small game and edible plants. Years later, Temujin remembered Sorkan's bravery and kindness and rewarded him with a gift of land, and Sorkan's sons were made generals in Temujin's army.

When Temujin was about 16 years old, he returned to the Merkit tribe and claimed Borte as his bride. He brought her and her mother back with him to his camp where he began to take the steps necessary to become a conqueror of many and a great leader.



4

BECOMING KHAN

Shortly after Borte had settled in with Temujin, he began to build what would one day become a great army. He realized that to get others to join him, he needed to align himself with someone more powerful than himself. He also realized that he could not attract loyal followers with nothing to offer them, so he approached Toghrul, the head of the Kerait tribe and *anda*-brother to his father, Yesugei. He offered Toghrul his allegiance, and for his pledge he received from the powerful chieftain a promise of protection.

When Temujin first visited Toghrul, he brought with him a gift of a black sable cloak that had been Borte's dowry, and said, according to Paul Ratchnevsky in *Genghis Khan, His Life and Legacy*, "In earlier days you swore friendship with my father. Accordingly, you are as my own father." Toghrul accepted the offering with pleasure and liked what he saw in the young man.



Temujin prayed to the sun and thanked the mountain where he and his family had hidden from the Tayichigud tribe. This would not be the last time Temujin—and later, as Genghis Khan—would pray to the sun for spiritual guidance.

He offered to reunite Temujin's clan, which had dispersed widely. From the first, this arrangement was beneficial to both men.

Gradually, Temujin's clansmen returned and brought

along others who also pledged their allegiance to him. One of the first to join him was Jelme, who would later save Temujin's life. Even as he began to gather a sizeable group, the leaders of the Tayichigud tribe, threatened by his growing power, were making plans to attack his camp and capture him again. The Tayichigud joined ranks with the Merkits, who were still unhappy over the abduction of Ho'elun years before. This retaliatory strike may have been successful if not for the warning of his mother's servant, who dreamed that the earth was shaking and believed it meant soldiers were preparing to attack. She woke Temujin, and the alarm went out. Nearly everyone managed to escape before the tribes descended on the camp. Unfortunately, Borte was left behind and was captured and taken back to the Merkit camp. There she was given as a wife to the younger brother of the man who had first married Ho'elun.

Temujin fled to the forests of the mountain Burkhan Khaldun. Even though his enemies followed him there, he remained well hidden and managed to elude the searchers for three days. They finally gave up and left, and when they were well away from the mountain, Temujin and his family came out of hiding. He proclaimed that the mountain had saved his life. He vowed that he would never forget what the mountain had done and would make a sacrifice to the mountain and pray to it every day. He also vowed that his descendants would remember and abide by the pledge. He sealed his vow by facing the sun, taking off his hat and sash, and kneeling down nine times to the sun. He also prayed and made offerings to the mountain while striking his chest with his hand.

While Temujin and his family were in hiding, Borte remained with the Merkits, and Temujin went to Toghrul for help in rescuing his wife. Toghrul told Temujin to first raise an army of 500, which he did by recruiting



men from various surrounding tribes. Many of these men became the core of his permanent army. Toghrul also called on Jamuka, Temujin's childhood friend, who also amassed an army of 500 men. The two men and their individual armies attacked the Merkits and freed Borte. Soon after her return, Borte gave birth to her first child, Jochi, who Temujin raised as his own, even though it is probable that Borte became pregnant while a prisoner of the Merkits.

The raid on the Merkits was successful on several levels. Temujin came back with his wife, riches, and the respect of the men who had joined his army. It was generally felt that he had the qualities of a leader to reunite his tribe. He was generous and fair with his men, and was seen to be extremely capable and wise in his decision-making. According to Ratchnevsky, Temujin illustrated his belief that he was destined for big things by declaring: "My strength was fortified by Heaven and Earth. Fore-ordained for this by Mighty Heaven, I was brought here by Mother Earth."

Temujin and Jamuka became close friends once again, sharing a camp but continuing to train their own armies. The partnership lasted for nearly two years, but could not remain close for long, because the force of Temujin's personality and charisma naturally drew men to him and instilled fear in other leaders. As Temujin's reputation and power grew, even Jamuka began to be afraid of his friend. Once, when the two armies were traveling together, Jamuka wanted to stop for the night, but Temujin wanted to continue. Many of Jamuka's men left him and followed Temujin. At about this time, Temujin was named *khan*, or leader, of his reformed tribe and was considered the equal of other tribal leaders.

The friendship between the two men finally ended around 1186 when one of Temujin's men killed Jamuka's

younger brother. Although it is possible that Temujin was unaware of the crime, Jamuka raided Temujin's camp seeking revenge. Temujin managed to escape, but Jamuka captured about 70 of his men, who he had boiled alive as retribution for the murder of his brother.

During the next few years, Temujin concentrated his efforts on building an army and training his men. He organized the army into platoons based on units of 10. Each group had specific functions and was combined with other units into 1000-man groups called *quarans*. At one point early on, he had built his army up to 13 *quarans*. Commanders communicated their positions and movements to each other with white and black signal flags, and scouts were used to bait the enemy forces and lead them right into traps set by other leaders.

According to some sources, Temujin was tall for a Mongol and had eyes like a cat. He was said to have great endurance, living with extremes of hot and cold better than most. The difficulties of his early life, it seems, helped him grow into his name—into a man of iron. At the same time, he was reputed to be a fair and generous commander, known to give a man the cloak off his back. Although he was single-minded in his quest for power, he was also careful to share gains with followers.

Accounts of Temujin glorify him as intelligent, brave, and an adept fighter, even from an early age. As such he was a real threat to the leaders of the other tribes of the steppes, and was required to fight nearly constantly to maintain his status. Over the course of the next 15 years or so through nearly constant fighting, Temujin consolidated many of the tribes around him and amassed large areas of land.

In the mid-1190s, the chance came for Temujin and Toghrul to fight again against a common enemy, the Tatars, who had been raiding the camps of the Chin, in northern



China. The Chin emperor asked for Toghrul's help in subduing the Tatars. He agreed and brought in Temujin. According to Ratchnevsky, Temujin said, "In days gone by, the Tatars killed our ancestors and forefathers. We will sacrifice them in revenge and retribution, by massacring all except the youngest. They will be massacred down to the very last male and the remainder will be shared out as slaves among us all." Temujin was true to his word and killed nearly all the Tatars in this attack. He did, however, rescue a small boy who had somehow survived the attack and raised him as an adopted son. Years later, the boy became a justice of the Mongol Empire.

In gratitude for the defeat of the Tatars, the Chin emperor named Toghrul *yang*, or king, of areas north of China. He named Temujin *Ja'utquri*, or Keeper of the Frontier. Temujin used this battle as an excuse to get rid of several descendents of the earliest Mongolian khans who were his direct competitors. When they refused to participate in the war against the Tatars, Temujin declared war on them for their disobedience, and they were all put to death.

Temujin and Toghrul continued to fight numerous smaller battles together, resulting in Toghrul becoming the most powerful ruler in Mongolia. After a time, with Toghrul once again by his side, Temujin wanted to fight Jamuka in retaliation for the 70 men he had killed so horribly. Meanwhile, a group of tribes, including the Merkit, Naiman, Jajirat, and Saljut, had joined forces to attack Temujin and Toghrul whose alliance had become so powerful that everyone else felt threatened. The tribes gathered in a *kuriltai* and appointed Jamuka as their supreme leader, or *Gur-Khan*, around 1201. His appointment proved that Jamuka was considered as great a leader at that time as Temujin, who was his direct opponent, and the adversary most wanted by the tribes. Temujin and Toghrul attacked the alliance, but the battle was halted



This painting depicts the slaying of Genghis Khan's ancestors. In a speech, Temujin described how the Tatars had killed the ancestors of both the Chin and the Mongols, and vowed that all except the youngest would be massacred.

because of a fierce snowstorm. Jamuka retreated and the alliance disbanded.

Battlefield stories of this time are dramatic. Once, according to Nicolle, Temujin was hit in the neck with an arrow and was saved only by the quick thinking of Jelme, the warrior who had been among the first to join him and was now a trusted companion. Jelme carried Temujin from the battlefield and sucked out the blood clot, allowing the wound to close. Years later, Jelme, the son of a humble blacksmith, became a leading Mongolian general. Another story relates the death of Temujin's favorite horse by an arrow. It was said that the horse was chestnut with a white muzzle that resembled the one he had ridden when he had escaped from the Tayichigud when he was a boy. During the battle in which the horse was killed, a prisoner admitted being the archer. He was brought before Temujin, who took a liking to the excellent marksman and pardoned him, adding him to the ranks of his army. He renamed him Jebe, or Arrow, in honor of the event. Jebe also went on to become a great Mongolian general.

Temujin and Toghrul were still allies, and as Toghrul aged, he knew he needed to name a successor. Toghrul's son, Senggum, was terribly jealous when he realized that his father intended to name his faithful ally, Temujin, to that position. Senggum, who was friendly with the treacherous Jamuka, began to sow the seeds of distrust in his father. Suspicions were inflamed by other tribal leaders fearful of Temujin's growing power, and finally, old and weary, Toghrul gave in to the urging of his son and made a break with Temujin.

When Temujin suggested that his eldest son, Jochi, would make a fine match for one of Toghrul's daughters, Senggum at first denied his request, then, as a ruse, agreed to the marriage and invited Temujin to a dinner to formalize the engagement. Temujin accepted the invitation to the meeting,

which was really an excuse to isolate the leader and murder him. On his way there, however, Temujin stopped to visit an adviser who warned him of the plot, and Temujin quickly returned to his camp. When he failed to show up at the dinner, Toghrul realized that his plan had been discovered, and he and Jamuka sent a group of men to find Temujin. Although his men fought bravely, Temujin was outnumbered and retreated.

He withdrew to the country and began to recruit men to join his army. He spread stories about Toghrul and the alliance led by Jamuka, increasing doubt and suspicion toward them. Over time, he received reports that the nomadic soldiers led by Jamuka were drifting and realized that he may have needed only to wait them out. Later that year in 1203, he and his army of 6000 attacked Toghrul's camp. The Keraites, led by Toghrul, were trapped between two rivers and fought bravely for three days but were defeated. Toghrul and his son were killed by another tribe, and Jamuka was captured. Temujin offered to spare his life, but Jamuka chose to be put to death. Temujin distributed the Kerait people among already established clans. He then pronounced himself khan of the Keraites and was accepted as such by the tribe.

Almost immediately, Temujin attacked the Naiman—the last tribe left that had any real power to oppose him. The Naimans had incorporated members of other defeated tribes, and they faced off against Temujin in 1204. The Naiman king, Tayang, led his army of warriors from several different tribes in a brave defense, but Temujin and his men were too numerous and strong. The Naimans were overpowered, and King Tayang was mortally wounded in the battle.

By defeating every tribe that had been his enemy and requiring their allegiance, Temujin united all of Mongolia.



In 1206 he called a *kuriltai*. At this meeting, Temujin was named Genghis (sometimes spelled Chinggiz) Khan, meaning oceanic, perfect, or supreme warrior king. With this title, the man once called Temujin was ready to fulfill his destiny and to change the course of history forever.



5

SUPREME OCEANIC RULER

It was at the *kuriltai* in 1206 that Kokchu, a powerful shaman, proclaimed that Genghis Khan was the great khan because of “the strength of the Eternal Heaven.” This divine mandate meant to Genghis Khan and his followers that the outcomes of battles were determined by God. This divine determination then became a political doctrine to justify wars and the addition of territory as well as a moral justification for war.

With this divine mandate in place, Genghis went on to choose a judge to whom he gave the power to punish those who had been disloyal to him and reward those who had remained steadfast. These names were recorded in books that became the foundation of Genghis Khan’s famous set of rules, or *Yasa*, which were added to and refined throughout Genghis’ lifetime and even after his death. The *Yasa* outlined behavior for business and private life as well as punishments for different crimes and what constituted a crime.



Now Temujin had been declared Genghis Khan, or “supreme oceanic ruler.” He wasted little time in administrating over the united tribes and readying the Mongol army for the first of many conquests that would make him infamous.

Here was a relatively young man who had united the warring tribal factions of his people, creating one Mongolia for the first time. Genghis Khan used three ideas to unify the kingdom, all of which were familiar to the individual tribes. One was *Quda*, the tie of marriage, which he used to secure political allies by giving his daughters in marriage to two leaders of nearby kingdoms. The second was *Anda*, the tie of

sworn brotherhood, for which gifts were given and oaths sworn between two men to secure a bond. Yesugei and Toghrul had been *anda*-brothers, as were Temujin and Jamuka. The third idea was *Nokor*, the tie of friendship, which made relationships strong.

Genghis Khan put a system of government into place in the capital city of Karakorum. He was diplomatic and looked out for the welfare of his people, in part by taxing the wealthier citizens in order to provide the poor with felt for their *gers* and with food. He enjoyed giving gifts and often would present others with gold, pearls, and clothes. Ratchnevsky writes that Genghis Khan once said to his large group of bodyguards, “It is my intention that your wives and daughters shall be dressed from head to foot in gold embroidered dresses, ride quiet geldings and have clean and pleasant tasting water to drink; your herds shall have good pastures and the highways shall be cleared of rubble and rubbish.”

Genghis Khan organized Mongolia’s food supplies, herds of sheep and horses, intelligence, security, and transportation. He set up a census system, which helped with recruitment, and a decimal-based system of organizing not only the military—where all fighting groups were based on units of 10—but the tribes as well, which he treated more as blended families, which kept any one clan from becoming too powerful.

While Genghis Khan was organizing his government and planning his next tactical maneuver, he found he was threatened from within by the shaman Kokchu. Even while Kokchu continued to proclaim the godlike status of Genghis Khan, he had begun to interfere in the leader’s private business. On the urging of Ho’elun and Borte, Genghis Khan, despite his respect and fear of the powerful magic ascribed to shamans, finally had Kokchu put to death. It is said that out of fear of the spirits, he had Kokchu killed by breaking his back, so none of the holy man’s blood would be shed.

Genghis Khan had thousands of warriors at his disposal,



ready to fight and die at his command, and realized that this fighting machine would not last long if not used. The men would become unfocused and restless—and could thus cause problems. [It was inevitable that he would look for new lands and people to conquer.] He soon turned his attention outward, first toward the Turks living just outside the Mongolian borders.

Between 1207 and 1209, neighboring Turkish tribes submitted to Genghis Khan and his army one after another. Some who resisted were destroyed, and others were incorporated into the Mongolian tribe. One wise king, Barchuq of the Uighur tribe, realized he could not resist Genghis Khan for long and sent this message, according to Nicolle: “It is with great joy that I learned of the glory of my lord Genghis Khan. The clouds have made way for the sun, the rivers freed from ice. Grant me your favor and I will dedicate my strength to you. I shall be as a fifth son to you.”

With such foresight, King Barchuq ensured the survival of the Uighurs. Genghis Khan even looked to them as leaders in the arts and teachers of ways of government. The Uighurs were students of Islamic and Chinese military techniques, including siege warfare, which became central to many of Genghis Khan’s successful conquests. It is believed that they may have taught these methods to the Mongols. Genghis Khan found that trapping his enemies inside the city walls severely limited their options.

After conquering the Uighurs, Genghis Khan’s army raided the Chinese people in the Xi Xia region on the far side of the Gobi Desert. They had no trouble subduing these peaceful people, and moved onto the Chin state in northern China. Here, Genghis Khan encountered unaccustomed resistance. His army would enter rural areas and raid the outlying villages, but were unable to conquer the towns with their heavy fortifications. The Mongols would attack and then retreat, and the Chin would move in, resupply and make repairs, only to have the Mongols attack once again.



A painting depicting Genghis Khan and his forces storming a fortress in Xi Xia. Soon the Chinese would feel compelled to build a wall against his forces—and this wall would later grow into the sprawling monument known today as the Great Wall of China.

For the first time, Genghis Khan and his army were face to face with methods of warfare and weapons they had not seen before: flamethrowers, battering rams, and catapults. In addition, there were simply too many Chinese to fight! No matter how many soldiers were killed, there always seemed to be sufficient replacements to hold off the Mongols or push them back. While it is accepted that the Great Wall of China did not exist in its present form during Genghis Khan's rule, it was rebuilt and modified after the 15th century, supposedly as a response to his many fierce attacks.

It was during these attacks on Chinese soil, which spanned about six years, that Genghis Khan's reputation as a ruthless barbarian began to take hold. Many cities were leveled, and thousands of innocent people were savagely murdered. According to some accounts, Genghis Khan's men chopped off arms and legs of living enemies and killed small children by burning them in huge piles or impaling them on lances while their mothers were made to watch.

However cruel he may have been, Genghis never used torture and always gave his enemies a chance to surrender before fighting. He never fought undeclared wars and always told his enemy of his intentions. But, once the fighting started, it was a different story—if an enemy decided against surrender, then Genghis showed no mercy. It is entirely possible that the statistics regarding his cruelty were as exaggerated as those of his skills and exploits. It was said his army killed 2,400,000 men in one city, when it was discovered later that only about 200,000 were actually there; rumor had it that the Mongolian horses were big enough to eat trees and that the warriors had to use ladders to mount them. The truth was the Mongolian horses were indeed hardy creatures, but smaller than the average horse.

While it is true that he was merciless in battle, Genghis Khan was a shrewd administrator of conquered cities—when he allowed the city to stand and the people to live. If



Genghis would fight on and off with the armies in Northern China until his death—and beyond. Kublai Khan (shown here), the grandson of Genghis, would found the Yuan Dynasty in northern China in the 1300s after finally subduing the region.

this, Genghis could impose taxes on the conquered, creating revenue for himself. He also let the people run their daily lives without much interference. He allowed for religious freedom and, realizing that the Chinese were more culturally advanced than the Mongols, he employed many Chinese advisers. As



much as he admired the Chinese, however, he did not allow his men to live in that country, but maintained a base camp in a remote area of Mongolia to which he and his troops returned after each engagement.

In 1214, after several attacks and a month-long siege, the Mongols finally entered the capital city of Zhongdu, also known as Beijing. The emperor there offered up gold, silver, horses, slaves, and a princess (who became one of Genghis Khan's wives) to withdraw from the city. After Genghis agreed, the court quickly relocated, an action that Genghis took as a way for it to regroup in order to counterattack. Genghis returned to Zhongdu, and this time he showed no mercy to the city or its inhabitants. As the years passed, the armies of Genghis Khan continued to spar off and on with the cities of northern China. It was Genghis' grandson, Kublai, who finally subdued the people and founded the Yuan Dynasty there in the mid-1300s.

It is unclear whether or not Genghis Khan had a "master plan" to his empire-building or whether his strategies simply developed within the circumstances that presented themselves. The tactics used by his armies were not entirely new, but the coordination and discipline with which they were carried out was unprecedented. The talent Genghis Khan had shown in unifying his troops extended to the people and nation of Mongolia. Eventually the idea of divine mission extended to the theory of world conquest as he continued his domination over nearly everyone he encountered.



6

CONQUEST OF THE WEST

After Genghis Khan had managed to put China more or less under his control, he turned his attention to trade with Persia. The country far to the west on the opposite side of the Pamir Mountains was Islamic. And it was here that Genghis Khan's reputation for outrageous barbarism was cemented.

According to Nicolle, he wreaked appalling havoc in this region, making it seem as if he had a "particularly vindictive attitude toward Islamic civilization." Yet his fair treatment of Turkish Muslims and the fact that he had soldiers who were Islamic show that Genghis Khan had "no particular hatred of Islam. The carnage resulted from political and military considerations, not from cultural ones."

In 1218, Genghis Khan sent a caravan of ambassadors and goods for trade with a written trade agreement to the shah Muhammed of Khwarazm, who ruled this fairly new state of



A common scene during Genghis' campaigns. This depiction shows Genghis receiving the daughter of a conquered leader as well as other spoils of war. In 1218, Genghis was still only halfway towards conquering his eventual empire—just having finished with China, he now looked to the west to Persia.

this area of central Asia. Apparently, the communication was made in such a way as to insinuate that the sultan was a vassal of Genghis Khan. The caravan was ambushed, and the ambassadors were killed. Of course, the shah claimed that the

caravan also carried Mongolian spies, which very well may have been true, but the sultan's refusal to punish the perpetrators was a direct invitation to war.

Ratchnevsky wrote that when Genghis Khan heard the news of the slaughter, he climbed to the top of a mountain and prayed out loud, "I was not the instigator of these tribulations. Grant me the strength to exact vengeance!" Two powerful and obstinate leaders of great armies were ready and more than willing to face off in battle.

Genghis Khan spent that summer gathering his forces, laying in supplies, and preparing his horses and men. The shah spread out his warriors between several of his walled cities. At the end of that year, the Mongols attacked on three fronts. Jochi, the eldest son of Genghis Khan, led his troops to the city of Jend. His other sons, Jagatai and Ogodei, attacked Otrar, and a third faction headed for Khojend. Genghis Khan himself led forces to the city of Bukhara where the Mongolian army massacred everyone they could find.

In each of the other besieged cities, the Muslim religious and governmental leaders were killed. The cities were burned and their entire populations, including women and children, were killed if they resisted for too long. Sometimes, craftspeople and artisans were spared, and were either sent back to Mongolia or kept to build weapons for the next battle. Word of the butchery of the Mongols preceded them and frightened citizens of the next towns, and cities begged to join the Mongolian army in order to have the lives of their families spared.

As the Mongols moved into the areas of Afghanistan and eastern Iran and began slaughtering his people, Muhammad remained in hiding and was unable to lead effectively. His home city of Otrar was held in a five-month long siege that ended in the public torture of the governor and murder of all the residents. Somehow the shah escaped and fled to an island

in the Caspian Sea, where he died in December 1220. At the same time, Genghis Khan's troops finally conquered the city of Urganj after seven days of fighting in which everyone—even women and children—participated. The other Islamic cities of Merv, Nishapur, and Balkh fell later that spring. In his orderly, all-encompassing way, Genghis Khan even ordered the tombs of past leaders destroyed and the course of the river Syr Darya diverted so that it flowed through the remains. Nicolle writes that near huge statues of Buddha in Afghanistan, “even the animals were slaughtered in revenge for the death of Genghis Khan's favorite grandson, killed in the fighting.”

The Muslims did manage to defeat the Mongols in at least one major battle of the long war. Jalal Al-Din, the shah's son, led his troops to victory in a two-day battle at Parwan. On hearing of the defeat of this branch of his army, Genghis Khan brought in the full force of the rest of his men and pushed Jalal Al-Din and his men back to the banks of the Indus River in Pakistan. In a back-and-forth standoff, Jalal first pushed the Mongols back, then the Mongols pressed the Muslims back up to the edge of the river. In a final push, the Muslims attacked the Mongols fiercely but were greatly outnumbered, and the outcome was assured. Although most of the Muslims were killed, Jalal Al-Din raced toward the river. His horse leapt from the cliff and the two escaped to freedom by swimming to the other side of the river. Genghis Khan prevented his sons and officers from following, and told them that Jalal was a hero upon whom they could model themselves.

As gallant as he could be towards worthy adversaries such as Jalal-Al Din, Genghis Khan also could be resolutely harsh. A city's total devastation was usually caused by one of three reasons: if one of Genghis Khan's ambassadors was killed while requesting the city's surrender; if the city rebelled after initially submitting; or if a member of the royal family was killed. The city of Herat was mostly undisturbed when the

governor submitted to Genghis Khan in 1220. Some time later, after the local Mongolian army had suffered a minor defeat and Genghis Khan had returned to the mountains, the people of Herat changed their minds and rebelled. Since rebellion was something Genghis Khan absolutely would not tolerate, the people knew they could expect no mercy for this uprising. Fearing what would happen if they surrendered, they held out for six months. When the city fell, hundreds of thousands were massacred. As the Mongolian army rode off, the few residents who had managed to hide came out and began to bury the dead, but the Mongols returned and killed those few stragglers.

A second city, Nishapur, in northeast Iran, also seemed spared in 1220 when the citizens responded quickly and appropriately to a Mongolian army request for supplies. However, when the army came back by the city several months later, the citizens resisted, and in the fighting a commander named Toquchar was killed. Toquchar was, unfortunately for Nishapur, a member of Genghis Khan's family, and when the city finally surrendered, every man, woman, and child was put to death. It is said that even all the cats and dogs were killed, all the buildings were razed, and the land where the city had once stood was so clear that it could be used for planting.

Besides the sheer intimidation caused by fear of his legendary cruelty, Genghis Khan used various means of psychological warfare and trickery. For example, when approaching the city during the siege of Samarkand in 1219, Genghis Khan had included all his prisoners among his troops to make it seem that he had many more men than he actually did. Then, when he had surrounded the city, he used the prisoners as human shields. He was known to order each man to light a fire at night to make it seem as if there were many more troops actually on the field, and his men often used straw dummies on horseback as a ruse.



A Persian painting of Genghis Khan shows him demanding buried treasures from the city of Bokhara. His Persian campaigns only added to his reputation for utter devastation, although many cities with pragmatic leaders surrendered peacefully in order to minimize bloodshed.

After three days of steady bombardment at Samarkand, the sultan's soldiers attacked the Mongols, and Genghis Khan ordered his cavalry to withdraw. The shah's troops left the city walls to follow the Mongolian horsemen, and when they were clear of the walls, the cavalry wheeled about and killed about half of the warriors. Two days later, the city surrendered, and Genghis Khan began an organized plan to finish it off. First, the Turkish soldiers—mercenaries who had fought for the shah, then volunteered to fight for the Mongols—were systematically killed, for Genghis Khan despised traitors. Then all the civilians were herded out of the city and divided by skill level and age. Craftsmen, artisans, and others with skills were sent to Mongolia. The elderly were ignored, and the young men were assigned to fight for Genghis Khan's armies or used as human shields. The formerly magnificent city was reduced to a shell.

With that victory, Genghis Khan felt he would have no trouble conquering the rest of the shah's lands. He had his sons travel before him, spreading the word that everything now belonged to Mongolia. If residents in the various towns were quick to give the soldiers food and other supplies, they got off lightly, perhaps with only minor pillaging. In other cities the Mongols might order the citizens to leave and they would take their time looting. A Mongolian governor would be assigned to rule, and the inhabitants would go on with their lives. Of course, if there were the slightest rejection of the Mongolian general's demands, the city would be destroyed. One historian wrote that the principles of war—direction, mobility, security, concentration, and surprise—were woven into a web in which the doomed armies of the shah were trapped.

While Genghis Khan's armies were fighting in western Asia, he sent for Ch'ang Ch'un, a Taoist scholar from a remote province in China. The elderly sage hesitated to come; 700 miles was a long way to travel at age 71. He

eventually did consent to go and reached Genghis Khan's camp in northern Afghanistan in the fall of 1222. After he had spent a year traveling and had covered thousands of miles, Genghis Khan had only one question for the old man. Do you have a medicine to provide immortality? The teacher answered no—medicine can prolong and preserve, but cannot provide everlasting life. The scholar must have made a positive impression on the warlord, who provided an escort for the return trip to China, later exempted Taoist masters from paying taxes, and set aside land in Peking for Ch'ang Ch'un to build his own monastery. Interestingly, the Taoist master and the brutal warlord would later die in the same month in the same year.

By the time Ch'ang Ch'un returned to China, it had become obvious to Genghis Khan that he could not continue his conquest of the world at such an amazing rate. By this time, he ruled Mongolia, parts of China, and all of the lands formerly ruled by Muhammad. He and his sons led an army of 130,000 men—not nearly enough to continue their expansion and manage the lands and peoples already amassed. The Mongol strategy of massacring entire cities after their surrender gave them fewer people to control, but their victories were overtaking their ability to manage their vanquished foes. Moreover, part of Genghis Khan's original objective in this part of the world had been to ensure that local sultans did not disrupt his trade. Because of the vast amount of land involved, Genghis Khan decided to “simply” incorporate these people into Mongolia. These successful conquests added 1,100 million acres in this area alone. By 1225, he controlled 2,100 million acres altogether. During his rule, he doubled the country's size, and made it the largest empire ever seen.

The answer to Genghis Khan's conundrum was partially found in Turkish soldiers who joined the Mongolian troops in great numbers. Their people held many of the same customs



Genghis Khan on his deathbed with his four sons in an inaccurate depiction (his fourth son Jochi had died). His sons kept news of Genghis' death secret and no one knows where he is buried to this day.

and the same origin as the Mongols, and Genghis Khan's army, already composed of thousands of Chinese, was now made up of thousands of Turks as well to supplement its Mongolian core. Genghis realized that he could not be everywhere at once, so he spread the word that his sons were

imbued with the same divine authority he enjoyed.

During this extended period of warfare in Islamic lands, the Tanguts of China rebelled once more against their Mongolian rulers. In late 1226, Genghis Khan put down the rebellion along the banks of the frozen Huang He River. Not long after that success, Genghis Khan fell ill and died.

The exact cause of his death remains a mystery. Some believe he fell from his horse, perhaps suffering severe internal injuries. Italian explorer Marco Polo wrote that Genghis Khan was wounded by an arrow during a final campaign, and the infected wound led to his death. Still others say he simply died of natural causes. He headed back to Karakorum, but died en route with his three remaining sons by his side. (His eldest, Jochi, had died in the Islamic campaigns.) On his deathbed, Genghis Khan outlined to his youngest, Tului, plans for future campaigns that should be followed by his successors to finish the destruction of the Chin Empire. According to Ratchnevsky, he told his sons, "My sickness is too serious to cure and one of you will have to defend the throne and the power of the state and expand this structure which has been given such firm foundations." And in August 1227, at about the age of 60, Genghis Khan died.

Fearful of what their enemies would do, Genghis Khan's sons kept his death a secret for a while, and foreign affairs were carried on as if he were still alive. Legend has it that he was buried secretly, and as his men returned to Karakorum, anyone who might have known of his death was killed to prevent the truth from being known.

It is said that he was buried on a slope of "his" mountain, Burkhan Khaldun, but there is no description anywhere detailing the type of funeral he had or precisely where he was laid to rest. Mongols were known to hide the burial spots of their great chiefs, perhaps to avoid looting and desecration of the grave. A site was carefully excavated and just as carefully

put back together after the burial so that no one would know the site was there. Trees may have been planted to hide the spot, or it could have been concealed in other ways. Often, slaves who had participated in the burial and hiding of the tomb were killed to prevent them from telling anyone where the grave was located.

Many have searched for his tomb, and numerous theories have been put forth. The Russian explorer Colonel Nicholas Prjevalski wrote in the mid-1800s that he had heard of a shrine in the Ordos region where the body lay “in two coffins, one of silver, the other wood, placed in a yellow silken tent in the center of the temple. Here, too, beside the coffin, lie the arms of Genghis Khan.” This shrine Prjevalski talked of is popularly believed to house Genghis Khan’s remains. It was nearly destroyed during a Japanese invasion, but still stands. In fact, when the 800th anniversary of his birth was celebrated in 1993, about 30,000 Mongols made a special pilgrimage to Ordos to pay him homage.

Another theory states that he was buried on Burkhan Khaldun and a tribe was appointed to guard his grave. Eventually, the tribe moved on to the Ordos, the forest grew over the site, and the tribe continued to claim responsibility for being the guardians of Genghis Khan’s tomb, all the while failing to mention that they had moved without bringing his remains with them. A third story claims that Genghis Khan was buried near a river, which was then diverted to cover the grave or the spot was flooded, leaving his remains at the bottom of a newly created lake.

Regardless of the actual resting spot of Genghis Khan, a large rock cairn called an *obo* has been built on the summit of Burkhan Khaldun. Pilgrims who make the climb to the top of the steep, forbidding mountain leave offerings there to his spirit. Money, food, and clothing are stuck in among the rocks and twigs. This cairn, surrounded by smaller, less adorned cairns, is known as “Genghis Khan’s Seat.” This location is the



spot where, as legend has it, he first came as the newly appointed “Oceanic Ruler” to inspect his vast territory.

It was reported that before he died, Genghis Khan designated his third son, Ogodei, to the throne with this advice: “Life is short, I could not conquer the world. You will have to do it.” So the conquests continued from Ogodei down to Kublai, expanding the Mongolian Empire and continuing Genghis Khan’s unfinished work. In 1228, Ogodei was selected as Khan at a *kuriltai* in Karakorum.



THE MONGOLIAN ARMY

Genghis Khan's army was well disciplined and organized, and he was a talented soldier who understood his men. He realized early that he needed to have a central guard, which would remain near him at all times. Although there were not many men in this group, it was made up of select archers and swordsmen. His generals were appointed from within this royal guard. Second, he understood that an army needed to be well provisioned, and he set up a special unit to follow and protect the caravans of food and equipment. Third, he relied heavily on his cavalry and knew that its horses must be well cared for at all times and highly trained in order for the army to be successful.

As a way to increase numbers and as an answer to the question of what to do with the thousands of enemy soldiers he conquered, he integrated foreign troops into his army, swelling its ranks. By the time of Genghis Khan's death, his army of about 130,000 was



Ghosts from the past come alive in Mongolian National Day, where horsemen wear traditional dress and allow a look at what Genghis Khan's Mongol Horde might have looked like.

composed of more Turks than Mongols, although the Mongols retained the title of the elite and served as his royal guard (and his generals were appointed from within the royal guard). Since the army was organized in decimal fashion, all units were based on tens. Each unit of 10 had a captain, as did units of hundreds, thousands and ten-thousands.

Since children were taught to ride and hunt well at an early age, the riding and shooting skills of the Mongols were virtually

unsurpassed. All adult males in the Mongol Empire were expected to serve in the army until they turned 60. Soldiers were not paid, except for a share of the plunder. Their jobs were seen as a part of daily life rather than paid employment. In fact, soldiers paid a small tax called *gubchur* to their commanders to provide a form of insurance for old or sick warriors.

The Mongolian army was tough, accustomed to enduring the harsh winters of the steppes. Very little was able to slow the troops down, not human opponents or natural obstacles. They were able to fight in the winter, when others often fought only in fair weather. Genghis Khan's approach into Russia using that country's frozen rivers provided an element of surprise. Horses were indispensable for his armies, carrying their riders through deserts and over mountains believed to be impassable by the enemies. And even after long journeys through treacherous territories, the horses still came at the enemies with such speed and whirling and spinning maneuvers that they appeared magical.

The army used various techniques to vanquish their enemies. One common hunting method called *nerge* was to approach the enemy in a large circle, gradually tightening that circle until they could move in and kill or capture them. Sometimes, the warriors would pretend to run away, then suddenly turn and attack. The Mongols also would come at the enemy from several directions at once in surprise attacks. Small units of archers on horseback would attack the enemy in waves, moving with lightening speed and shooting with amazing accuracy. The first wave would then circle out of the way, making space for the second wave to attack. The enemy would be worn down by the constant barrage of arrows. Once the enemy was thoroughly confused and splintered, the armored guard would close in for the kill.

The Mongolian army was characterized by forethought and planning. Months before an attack, spies might be sent to enemy cities to infiltrate their camps. Reports would be sent back to the



base camp about numbers of troops and their morale. Genghis Khan's spies would also try to spread discontent among the enemy troops. Caravans of camels and horses served as supply trains for equipment and food for the men on the field. Black and white flags provided direction and communication from the leaders to the soldiers. Loud drumming often accompanied the attack to confuse the enemy and energize themselves.

Those who had been conquered by the armies of Genghis Khan—and lived to tell about it—often claimed these armies were comprised of huge numbers of men riding enormous horses. These statements were slightly inaccurate. The Mongol warrior rode one horse to war, trailing about four remounts. Each horse had to find adequate forage and pasture land to survive. Also, the Mongols would sometimes mount dummies on the backs of their spare horses, making their army seem larger.

The Mongolian soldier also could present a frightening spectacle. In the bitterly cold winter, the Mongol soldier would wear a fur cap with earflaps, a coat made of fur or felt, heavy leggings, and leather boots. He might have armor and a helmet, although helmets were not common. Helmets, as well as body armor, would be made of leather or iron and would usually be made with flaps to cover the temples. The body armor was known as *lamellar* and was made of many plates of different sizes laced together to cover all parts of the body. Most of the cavalry wore no armor. The small group that did fought with swords and spears, and their horses also were protected by armor plating. The saddles used by the cavalry must have been uncomfortable, as they were made of wood, with a high front and back. The stirrups were short and tight in order to give better control in close quarters.

The primary weapon was bow and arrow. Their bows were Central Asian composite bows, which originated in China. These bows were resistant to heat and cold, yet vulnerable to high humidity: perfectly suited to Central Asia's climate. The composite bows gave a regular release with a much further



An example of the stirrups employed by Mongol horsemen then and now.

draw than the standard European bow, which equalized the release of tension, allowing arrows to travel about twice as far with increased accuracy compared to bows with which we are familiar today. Most of these double-curved bows were made of wood, sinew, and horn, and had a thumb ring to help draw the string. Originally, the thumb ring was a carved stone; today it is made from leather. Arrows were made from hollow reeds that



could travel as far as 250 yards. It was typical for some warriors to use long bows, while others carried short weapons. The men were also equipped with special arrows for piercing armor, setting fire, and making whistling sounds as they flew through the air. Some of the spears were made with side hooks that were used to dismount an enemy rider.

The entire army was divided into thirds, reflecting in numbers the strength of the forces each division was to face. At the time of Genghis Khan's death, of the approximately 130,000 troops in the field, about 60,000 men faced China to the east, and about 40,000 faced Russia, with the remaining troops facing the Muslim world. Apparently, the people of the Siberian forests to the north were not seen as a threat.

The system of civil communication established by Genghis Khan was useful in warfare as well. The *orto* system provided the regular, accurate communication with the outlying territories and armies that was essential to the success of his campaigns as well as the Mongolian Empire. A series of relay stations was built across the entire country, from the Yellow Sea to the Black Sea. At each station, which were spaced about 25 miles apart, fresh horses would be ready and waiting for the messengers who would be carrying urgent and confidential messages. Unlike the Pony Express rider of the early United States, who passed along his packet of mail and messages to the next rider, the *orto* riders were expected to carry their communications the entire distance, preventing spies from intercepting important messages. They normally rode 50 to 70 miles a day. In emergencies, they were known to cover up to 250 miles in one day, rarely stopping for food or rest. They would strap themselves tightly into their wooden saddles to avoid falling out when they dozed off. These riders were allowed to ask for anything they needed from anyone along their route, and by law their requests had to be granted. Some messengers were known to abuse this privilege by taking more than their fair share.



A painting of a Mongol archer on horseback. The Mongols' composite bows played a large role in the army's successes in warfare. Their construction allowed for arrows to travel twice as far as those fired from conventional bows, as well as increasing their accuracy.

The manpower and coordination required to keep these stations in operation was overwhelming. Each station had a manager and grooms and provided food and water and fresh horses. Some sources estimate that well over one million horses were required to keep the *orto* system running. It was so successful in the undeveloped countryside that it continued to be used until the mid-1900s.

Stories abound of the ruthlessness and barbarity of Genghis Khan and his warriors. Some tell of whole regions

depopulated and cultures destroyed. According to *The Secret History of the Mongols*, the clear purpose of victory was “to despoil the enemy and bring home in triumph his desirable women, horses, cattle and movable valuables, to enslave the able-bodied and to hunt down and kill the chief of the rival clan.” Once this objective was accomplished, his army moved on, sometimes adopting children of the vanquished and incorporating the enemy warriors into his established clans. There was no gray area in Genghis Khan’s world. Either do his bidding or face his punishment, which was swift and extreme, although most sources agree punishment was carried out without rage or enjoyment. Obedience was simply expected.

During battles, punishment was swift and harsh for warriors who disobeyed the rules. Execution could be the result for something as minor as failing to stop to help a fellow warrior who had dropped something off his horse. Desertion and failing to advance with the troop always met with death. Genghis Khan’s army did not enjoy the most technologically advanced equipment or unique battle plans, but what they had that ended in almost universal conquest were fierceness, courage, dedication, and a thorough approach to battle planning.

Genghis Khan is reported to have advised his armies to watch with the vigilance of an old wolf in the daytime and at night with the eyes of a raven, and in battle to fall upon the enemy like a falcon. No doubt that his soldiers took their leader’s words to heart, as evidenced by their efficiency and track record.



THE LEGACY OF GENGHIS KHAN

Despite his brutal methods, Genghis Khan is widely revered throughout modern Mongolia as a national icon and the father of the nation. His image appears on stamps, money, calendars, and posters. He was a skilled military leader and talented administrator of his country who united disparate tribal units into one nation and led his people to prosperity. His empire stretched from present-day Korea into Eastern Europe, effectively, and for the first time, bridging the chasm between the eastern and western worlds.

Even though the Russians downplayed the importance of Genghis Khan to his people, reverence for him continued unabated, and at the end of Communist rule around 1990, his likeness appeared on every conceivable surface—banners, flags, buttons, pins, and posters—perhaps in the hope that the spread of his image would bring back the strong warrior spirit of the man. A special birthday celebration was organized in 1993 by the Genghis Khan



A Mongolian stamp with a soldier on horseback shows that the legacy of Genghis Khan is far from forgotten even today. Despite Communist rule attempting to diminish the memory of Genghis Khan, Mongols still held to his memory, and even still believe that he will return to lead them once again.

Society, complete with a Genghis Khan impersonator, poetry readings and speeches, and traditional Mongolian songs and dances. A grouping of tall poles holding banners symbolizing Genghis Khan's army was erected at the celebration. Nine white

yak tails were tied to the poles to symbolize the presence of the “Golden Family,” another name for his descendents (white yak tails were used during times of peace and black tails were hung with the banners during wartime).

Genghis Khan united the Mongolian people and instilled a national pride in them. He brought together a diverse people with a common background and made them feel necessary and useful. According to *The Secret History of the Mongols*, he said, “every man has his use, even if only to gather dried cow dung in the Gobi for fuel.”

Although Genghis Khan was illiterate, he recognized the importance of being able to read and write and ordered his officers to learn to do both. He learned to seal his orders with a stamp from the Naimans and the written language he appropriated from them as well. With this script, he had men write his *Yasa*. These laws originated from a combination of Mongol traditions and customs to which Genghis Khan added his own ideas and rules. It is believed that the first version of the *Yasa* appeared during the *kuriltai* of 1206 and that the code was constantly under revision throughout his lifetime.

The *Yasa* existed for a long time after his death, adding to the peaceful atmosphere of his country. The Mongolian constitution incorporates several of the ideals of Genghis Khan. It calls for the people to cherish national unity while respecting and tolerating other cultures. Article 16 allows for the right to a healthy and safe environment, which harks back to the shamanistic respect for nature. It also mentions the right to an education, which was one of the earliest dictates of Genghis Khan in forming his government.

The laws written in the *Yasa* were to be followed without question, and punishment was harsh for even minor infractions. Laws were strict, sometimes seemingly unusually so, and perhaps cruel, but they were clear and universal, so everyone knew exactly what to expect at all times. Mongols lived according to the rules of the *Yasa* for many years. Before it, the people had lived



confused, disorganized lives, but after its appearance, in civil and military matters, they lived according to much higher ethical standards. Before Genghis Khan's time, adultery, murder, and robbery were commonplace among the nomads, but after it, these crimes were rare. The Franciscan monk, John of Plano Carpini, who visited Mongolia in 1246, was impressed by the behavior of the people, and said that they were more obedient than the European clergy. There is no written version of the *Yasa* today and nothing exists that fully describes its contents.

More than 100,000 square miles of Mongolia were preserved in the early 1990s as areas for nature reserves. While Genghis Khan was conquering most of Central Asia, he forbade the cutting down of any trees in areas of the headwaters of rivers, which, according to environmentalists, has had a profound impact on the country. Mongolia receives so little rain every year that if there were no trees near the headwaters, rainwater would run off the hillsides, eroding soil on its way, which sets in motion a vicious cycle that leaves less soil to hold the water. Such a condition eventually leads to a truly devastating cycle of floods followed by droughts. However, because the forests were left undisturbed, the root systems of the trees absorb the rainwater, allowing trees and vegetation to flourish, reducing the amount of ground water lost to evaporation.

Of course, Genghis Khan was a warrior and a brutal, merciless enemy. In the areas of eastern Afghanistan where he ordered complete and total devastation on such a massive scale, his destructive power can still be felt. As they leveled the buildings in the cities and towns of that region, the Mongol army even destroyed the ancient system of underground irrigation, which was the only reason any agriculture flourished in that arid land. By killing most of the people who had farmed the land and maintained the irrigation system, the Mongolian invasion managed to set up a destructive cycle that has been felt for centuries.

The Black Death, or Plague, which wiped out about 25 million Europeans, about one-third of the population during the

14th century, was carried into that region by the soldiers of the Mongolian Empire. Some historians suspect that the death of so many and the lack of available workers eventually led to an increased value on the individual—a precursor to capitalism. Spread by airborne pathogens, the Plague is one of the most lethal diseases ever known. Characterized by high fever, shivering, swelling armpit and groin glands, and delirium, death usually came within 10 days. In Mongolia, the Plague is sometimes spread by mice and rats, but usually by marmots, small furry animals that look something like North American prairie dogs and are normally active and quick. During the Mongolian Empire, the Plague was known as marmot sickness, and the herdsmen knew to keep horses and sheep away from lethargic marmots. The European epidemic was once thought to have been introduced by rats jumping ship in harbors of the continent, but lately has been theorized to have been introduced by Mongolian warriors in their westward expansion. If so, millions more deaths can be attributed to Genghis Khan.

Someone as powerful and charismatic as Genghis Khan is bound to bring negative as well as positive qualities to the world around him and to leave a legacy that is rich in both. Tim Severin writes in *In Search of Genghis Khan*: “The nostalgia for Genghis Khan is perhaps part of the need for a common Mongol identity, a point of contact with fellow Mongols from other areas whom they did not know. Like the great heroes of other nations, Genghis Khan was a Mongol’s natural symbol of a glorious past.”

He proposes that the character, toughness, and horsemanship of the Mongolian people and their success in warfare are not enough to explain the phenomenon of the Mongol Empire. How could such a huge army with millions of men and horses function flawlessly, down to beginning a military campaign on the exact date it had been planned six months earlier, except for the domineering figure of Genghis Khan? Historian Tim Severin calls him one of the world’s great natural military leaders.

All of Genghis Khan’s success can be traced to his earliest



A statue of Genghis Khan. Many Mongols are keen to note Genghis' legacy of his *Yasa* and his role as a political leader rather than that of a brutal conqueror. Indeed, there are many impressive facets to the legend of Genghis Khan, but there is no doubt that his reputation as one of the ancient world's most influential figures is cemented.

decisions: Whom could he trust? With whom should he make alliances? His establishment of a well-organized military system and all its methods of communication and sophisticated armaments, a cavalry, and his plan for government. From an obscure childhood, he rose by the age of 42 to be considered the “leader of the people who live in felt tents,” as he proclaimed himself. Twenty years later he was dead, but his

empire covered nearly two-thirds of the known world. He had created an opportunity for the tribes to live in peace and to present a unified front to other nations. This unified identity led to a strong sense of nationalism that remained in force even during the Chinese and Soviet domination.

The Mongolian Empire thrived for several centuries, first under the rule of Genghis Khan's son Ogodei, and later under his grandson, Kublai Khan. The unity established by Genghis Khan and his heirs disappeared during the 14th and 15th centuries, however, when the Mongolian people split into eastern and western groups. By the middle of the 17th century, the Manchu (Chinese) had subdued much of Mongolia, beginning a rule that was repressive for the Mongolian people and kept them isolated from the rest of the world until the early 1900s. The Manchu also took advantage of the Mongols by forcing them to provide military and civil service, imposing high agricultural taxes, and enforcing harsh punishment for any act of disobedience. During this time, the descendents of Genghis Khan made up the Mongolian class of overlords, the princes and noblemen, or about 6 percent of the male population.

The Mongols staged many revolts against their Manchurian rulers. In 1921, the last and largest rebellion led to the formation of a republican monarchy. The fledgling government turned to Vladimir Lenin, the head of the Soviet government, for help. He advised them to develop their government in the Communist style, and the Mongolian People's Republic, a Communist government, was formed.

By the time Josef Stalin took over Russia in 1928, Mongolia had become a puppet state of the Soviets. The Soviet government did assist Mongolia in destroying feudalism; nearly eradicating syphilis (which had affected almost 90 percent of the population) and encouraging industrialization and the spread of modern medicine; and achieved a literacy rate greater than 90 percent, up from 9 percent. However, the Mongols



resented living in a communal state and having to turn over their property to the central government. Additionally, during the Communist rule, official censure and disapproval attempted to quench the memories of Genghis Khan. But Mongols held tight to his memory, perpetuating the belief that he will return to rule once again.

In 1989, the National Democratic Union was organized and quickly led to the country's democratization. The people ratified a new constitution in 1992. Today, a president, his cabinet, and an elected parliament govern Mongolia. Its legal system is based on a blend of Russian, Chinese, Turkish, and Western judicial systems. Everyone aged 18 and over may vote.

Mongolia today is one of the least populated countries in the world. With about 2.7 million inhabitants, there are only about 0.9 people per square mile, most of whom still practice the traditional nomadic, herding way of life.

With its nostalgic desire for the ideals of a man the rest of the world views as a ruthless barbarian, modern Mongolia is as much a paradox as the man who united the disparate and warring tribes into one country. According to Severin,

. . . thoughtful Mongols take pains to emphasize Genghis Khan's national role and gloss over his record as the great conqueror. They praise his statesmanship, his vision, the laws he promulgated, and his wisdom. Rarely, if ever, do they refer to any of his deeds outside the present boundaries of Mongolia. But Genghis Khan the warrior is difficult to separate from Genghis Khan the statesman and lawgiver, and had it not been for his military conquests, history would have paid little attention to a tribal chief who united the Mongol people, but never led them beyond of the confines of their Central Asian homeland.

◆ CHRONOLOGY ◆

- 1162 or 1167** Temujin is born (using the latter date for chronological purposes).
- 1176** Temujin is engaged to Borte.
- 1177** Yesugei, Temujin's father, is murdered by the Tatars.
- 1183 (approx.)** Temujin and Borte are married; she is kidnapped by the Merkits shortly thereafter.
- 1196** Temujin and Toghrul defeat the Tatars.
- 1202** Temujin attacks Toghrul and the Keraites.
- 1203** Temujin assumes title of King of the Keraites.
- 1204** Temujin defeats the Naiman tribe.
- 1206** Temujin is proclaimed Genghis Khan.
- 1205** Xi Xia invaded (whose people are also known as Tanguts).
- 1209** The Uighur tribe submits to Genghis Khan.
- 1211** Genghis Khan invades China.
- 1214–15** Genghis attacks and destroys Zhongdu.
- 1217** Kara-Khitai invaded.
- 1219** Sultan Muhammad Ala al Din of Khwarazm has several ambassadors of Genghis Khan killed, forcing him to declare war on the Islamic country.
- 1222–24** Mongols march through southern Russia.
- 1227** Xi Xia conquered a second time.
- 1227** Genghis Khan dies.
- 1228** Ogedei, the third son of Genghis Khan, is proclaimed Great Khan.

◆ CHRONOLOGY ◆

- 1234** Chin rulers in northern China overthrown.
- 1260** Kublai Khan, grandson of Genghis, is proclaimed Great Khan.
- 1271** Yuan dynasty proclaimed by Kublai.

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